



From global forest governance to domestic politics: The European forest policy reforms in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This article's originality and major contribution lies in its empirical roots. Based on the case study of the European Voluntary Partnership Agreement on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (VPA-FLEGT) in Cameroon, the paper questions what happens when global forest governance reforms meet domestic politics in Africa. Coupled with a carefully selected literature, this entrenchment helped to clearly identify the formal and informal strategies deployed by key actors to put or resist the European sustainable forest management policy reforms on the agenda in Cameroon from 2003 to 2019. The signing of the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon triggered several debates on the relevance of a new legal instrument for sustainable forest management against the backdrop of an already prolific (poorly or non-enforced) legislation. This article aims, on the one hand, at analysing the process through which VPA-FLEGT was put on the agenda in Cameroon, identifying the key actors involved and examining their roles, interests and strategies as regards this global forest policy instrument. On the other hand, it seeks to investigate how the institutionalisation of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon change or not the politics of forestland governance in national arenas. In order to attain the aforementioned objectives, we adopted a sociology of the State-based approach. The research indicates that (i) although VPA-FLEGT is an innovative policy instrument in Cameroon, it essentially relies on recycled already existing forest policies. (ii) Several technical and political roadblocks, largely underestimated or overlooked by European actors hamper the implementation of this instrument. (iii) Lastly, the legitimacy and relevance of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon is subject to many controversies and tensions among the main actors. Our research shows that Cameroonian state bureaucracy's commitment to this initiative was mainly motivated by a 'cunning government' strategy of rents capture and blame avoidance tactics.

1. Introduction

The issue of cross-border trade in illegal tropical timbers is supposed to have found a global solution with the emergence of the FLEGT (*Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade*) Action Plan in 2003. This global forest governance action plan is formulated in a series of measures (Box 1) aiming at combatting illegal logging and related trade. Initiated by the European Union (EU), the Action Plan was to embody EU's policy to combat the presence and use of illegal tropical timber in all its Member States (Overdevest and Zeitlin, 2014, Dlamini and Montouroy, 2017). This initiative to end illegal logging and related trade, designed and adopted by the European Commission, was

specifically destined for tropical countries that produce and export timber to the European market. It was to be implemented in tropical countries through the signing of Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) between producing and exporting countries on the one hand and the EU on the other hand (European Commission, 2014; FAO 2012; Pearce, 2012).

From a legal standpoint, VPAs are bilateral trade agreements, 'voluntarily' signed between contracting parties (FAO 2012; Van Heeswijk and Turnhout, 2013; Leipold et al., 2016; Montouroy, 2016). Their ultimate goal is to establish a system for issuing "FLEGT authorisations¹", to make sure the European market is supplied with tropical timber of lawful origin. The main instrument for operationalizing VPAs is the

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¹ Travel document and legality certificate of a wood cargo en route to Europe.

Box 1

A short overview of the EU VPA-FLEGT initiative.

EU FLEGT Action Plan is the result, on the one hand, of the taking into account of European consumers' concerns about the issues of sustainability and transparency related to the production and marketing methods of tropical timber sold in Europe. On the other hand, it partly results in the activism of key European conservation NGOs and environmental associations whose protests and *blame and shame* campaigns against EU's inaction in the face of the tropical deforestation tragedy, have helped to amplify and relay citizens' concerns about the issue of illegal timber flows from the tropics to European markets. The combination of these various pressures helped to put the fight against illegal tropical logging on the international agenda since 1998, during the 24th meeting of the Group of the Eight most industrialised States in the World (G8), held in Birmingham. In 2002, the European Commission launched a reflection on measures to combat illegal logging, and formally undertook to address illegal logging and related trade.

In May 2003, the EU published its FLEGT Action Plan with a series of seven measures to be implemented by the EU and its Member States to combat illegal logging worldwide. These measures include financial, technical and advisory support from the EU and its Member States to timber-producing countries to develop or strengthen enhanced governance structures and reliable systems to check the legality of timber and by-products; the introduction of incentives and the signing of bilateral agreements to promote legal timber trade between timber-producing countries and the EU; support to the private sector through capacity building for legal timber production; and the enhancement of the enforcement of existing forest legislation or the putting in place of more efficient mechanisms by the EU and its Member States.

The FLEGT Action Plan is structured around two instruments which aim at ensuring its effectiveness: the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) and Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs). In short, the VPA is a key element of the EU FLEGT. As a bilateral trade agreement component between the EU and timber-producing countries, the VPA aims to guarantee that wood flows between the two parties come from legal sources. The second major goal of VPA is to support parties in their efforts to stop illegal logging through a substantial enhancement of domestic forest policies and related law enforcement in timber-exporting countries. Since it entered into force in March 2013 in Europe, the EUTR for its part has been appealing on private operators of the timber market to exercise 'due diligence', i.e. to pay rigorous attention to the origin of the timber and by-products they deal with. The objective is to make sure all key actors from the production to the marketing chain abide by the rules of timber legality assurance- especially tropical timber- sold on the EU market. VPAs are bilateral trade agreements between EU and a country exporting timber and by-products to the European market. Though signed on a voluntary basis, their implementation is legally binding.

timber Legality Assurance System², LAS (EFI, 2009, FERN, 2013). In other words, signing a VPA-FLEGT implies a voluntary commitment from the parties to combat illegal logging, by advocating for a rigorous enforcement of existing forest regulations both within the tropical timber exporting State and in its trade flows with EU countries. Signing these agreements also implies a commitment by contracting parties to promote 'good' forest governance in countries that produce timbers and export them to the European markets (FERN, 2007, 2013; Pearce, 2012). In the specific case of Cameroon, a VPA-FLEGT was signed with the EU in October 2010 and entered into force in December 2011 after its ratification by presidential decree³ in August of the same year (Ue-Minof, 2012).

The emergence of FLEGT Action Plan triggered a reflexive momentum in the forest governance sector in Cameroon. It also gave rise to several debates on the ability of this EU policy instrument to ensure sustainable forest management against the backdrop of a proliferation of forest norms that are usually poorly or not implemented. Through the case study of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon, this research is a thorough and rigorous empirical analysis of the agenda-setting of European initiatives of forest governance enhancement in Cameroon. More especially, it aims to decipher if and how the formulation process of VPA-FLEGT became crucial to the construction of a public action and State's intervention in the area of forest governance and related policy reforms in Cameroon. In a nutshell, the concept of *agenda-setting* here refers to the selection, reformulation and transformation by policy makers of a social issue of public interest (deforestation for example) which needs to be tackled by public authorities given the adverse effects such an issue could have on the welfare and society (Birkland, 2006; Howlett et al., 2009).

The 1990-2010s made Cameroon an undisputable setting for the analysis of agenda-setting of 'good governance' and related forest policy reforms. The formulation of these policy reforms in Cameroon, generally externally driven (international development agencies, Western partner countries, conservation NGOs, etc.) was often faced with

various forms of resistance related namely to divergent interests between reform promoters and beneficiaries (Karsenty, 1999 and 2017; Ekoko, 2000; Dkamela et al., 2014; Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015).

The case study of the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon raises the fundamental question of the design and ownership modes (or otherwise) of international instruments of forest policy reforms, and changes they can bring about in undertaking public action in the forest sector in the tropics. Based on a case study of Cameroon, this article aims to answer the following question in particular: How do international policy instruments that promote sustainability and enhancement of the legality of export wood in particular, transform the politics of forestland governance and the State's ability to address illegal logging in timber-producing countries? Three hypotheses underpin the study: (i) The importation or transfer of international forest-related legality instruments ushered in a new momentum of transformation of laws, norms and principles of 'good' forest governance in Cameroon since the mid-1990s, (ii) The long-term effectiveness of these changes is altered by various political obstacles, especially those related to divergent interests between promoters and beneficiaries of the proposed forest policy reforms; (iii) Key actors lay more emphasis on reforms preparation processes than on their effective implementation, as the focus on preparation is sometimes sufficient to justify the formal will to reform (donors) or to avoid the blame for a skilful rejection of reforms (recipient countries).

2. A brief conceptual and theoretical framework

This research is mainly anchored on studies on African politics and social anthropology developed over the 1990s and 2000s (Mbembe, 1992, De Sardan, 1995, Hibou, 1998, Chabal and Daloz, 1999, Bayart and Ellis, 2000, De Sardan, 2008). The concept of 'imported State' (Badie, 1992) is used here to scrutinise the extent to which VPA-FLEGT can be considered as a 'voluntary' international policy instrument for sustainable forest management and legality in Cameroon as claimed by the promoters of this initiative. And understand how such an importation constitutes or no an attempt to 'graft' or 'westernise' forest policies in timber-producing countries like Cameroon as denounced by the recipients. How such a momentum could contribute to a loss of relevance of the Cameroonian forest governance, likely to deepen the

² It is a reliable method to distinguish legal forest products from illegal ones to make sure only legally acquired timber and by-products transit or can be shipped to the EU.

³ Decree n°2011/238 of 09 August 2011

Box 2

Reforming public policies in Africa: a nested process of imported government, ownership and inertia?

The concept of ‘imported state’ (Badie, 1992) suggests that the process of shaping post-colonial States, in Africa in particular, follows a form of bureaucratic logic based on the importation of the political, legal, economic, cultural and social models of the former Western colonial powers. It entails that the failure of these models in post-colonial societies is due to ‘transplant rejection’, which results in a loss of relevance and increases the dysfunctioning of these societies and their institutions. One of the major criticisms against this notion was made by Bayart (1996). According to this author, post-colonial States in Africa are not essentially derivatives of a passive Westernization. The formation and building of the State in these societies also follows some specificities associated with their own civilisations and cultures. In some cases, they may resort to various extraversion (Bayart and Ellis, 2000) or cunning tactics (Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015), as it was already the case in Cameroon in the 1990s-2000s with bureaucracy resistance.

Concerning ownership methods of reform policies in Africa, these include ways, means, and modalities through which public actors implement multilevel commitments, principles, and instruments of change in public action in a given sectoral policy (Ponte, 2004; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008; Whitfield and Jones, 2009). In the area of forestland policies, the issue of reforms ownership is particularly acute both at the international and national levels, at the regional and national levels (as in the management of cross-border protected areas) or at the national and local levels, as it is the case with decentralisation and empowerment of community forests and land tenure policies.

One of the roadblocks to the ownership of reform policies in Africa is the plague of inertia in the functioning of state bureaucracies. The works of Hanann and Freeman (1984) and Tushman and O’Reilly (1996) on ‘structural Inertia’ provide valuable insight on the modalities of inertia or delay as examples of what should be called *soft resistance* to public policy reform initiatives deemed illegitimate, oppressive or blatantly meddling in African politics. According to Hanann and Freeman (1984), the instinct of ‘Structural Inertia’ could be one of the outcomes of internal and external pressures on an organisation in order to influence its *modus operandi*, especially in favour of a certain type of interests particularly favourable to the authors of such pressures. Unlike these scholars, who consider structural inertia as an instinctive and unintentional behaviour of an organisation under pressure for change, Schwarz (2012) underscores that the use of inertia can be a deliberate, voluntary choice, or even a premeditated choice (Deliberate Structural Inertia) by decision-makers of an organisation more or less under pressure who perceive *status quo* or a business as usual behaviour as just another option to deal with external and internal pressures on their organisation. Within this type of organisation, the co-production of inertia therefore becomes a mode of “soft resistance” against any exogenous initiative that could compromise the private interests and agendas of the key actors of the organisation or State bureaucracy, in this research.

gap between the formal objectives of international instruments such as the VPA-FLEGT and the informal realities of the Cameroonian forest governance sector. This research is also anchored on the political Sociology of the State in Africa (Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Badie 2000; Bayart and Ellis, 2000; Eboko, 2015b; Blundo, 2015) which sheds more light on policy reform dynamics, i.e. the integration of global governance instruments, its alleged or actual transfer and importation in African countries on the one hand, and the logics and tactics of resistance (including inertia) developed by the recipient governments and related state bureaucracies of these reforms on the other hand (Box 2).

3. Methodological approach**3.1. Identifying and mapping the role of key actors**

The notion of ‘actor’ is key to the analytical framework of this research. It recalls the works of Crozier and Friedberg (1977) on the sociology of organisations and the recent works of Hufty (2011), Eboko (2015b), Schusser et al. (2016) on political sociology, including in forest policy domain as regards the works of the latter author. The short definition proposed by Schusser et al. (2016: 82) is of particular interest to understand the meaning of the concept of actor in the sphere of forest policy: “an actor is any entity that has a distinct interest and the ability to influence a policy”. This definition has the advantage to directly relate the term actor to a public policy arena, for which Eboko (2015a; b) has proposed an analytical tool specifically adapted to the Sub-Saharan African context, “the public action matrix” (*la matrice de l’action publique*). This conceptual framework on the public action matrix allowed us to better identify the key actors of the FLEGT process in Cameroon, with a clear understanding of their status, roles, interests, and intervention logics.

The different forms and levels of interactions between actors were identified, the political and socio-cultural parameters that influence these interactions were deciphered (De Sardan, 1995) and the potential points of breakage and continuity were analysed. In a nutshell, the focus was to rigorously scrutinise ‘practical norms’ in the anthropological sense of everyday social practices in Sub-Saharan Africa (De Sardan, 2008) that govern the dominant strategies of the key actors of

the EU FLEGT process in Cameroon. The analytical framework of the ‘Governance Analytic Framework’, GAF (Hufty, 2011) also served as a prism through which the possible changes introduced to forest governance in Cameroon by VPA-FLEGT were analysed.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

One of the major components of data collection and selection of key actors to be interviewed as part of this research was several immersions and observations (as participant or consultant where appropriate) in national and international arenas and fora on global forest governance and related policy reforms in Cameroon. Apart from a detailed analysis of many official and unofficial documents, empirical qualitative data were collected in different negotiation and discussion arenas on the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon (Yaoundé, Dschang, Ebolowa) from March 2016 to April 2019. Key semi-structured interviews (23), i.e. open discussions accompanied by selective note-taking, were also conducted with various actors and experts of the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon. One of the main constraints of this research was the difficult accessibility to some confidential reports on the VPA-FLEGT negotiation processes in Cameroon.

Data collected during participation in scientific and technical debates on forest governance reforms and meetings related to illegal logging issues allowed to better interpret the viewpoints of ‘experts’ and to appreciate the interconnection and mutual influence that exist between them and other key actors (policy makers, cooperation agency representatives, NGOs, etc.) of VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon. A document review allowed to take stock of the evolution of the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon from the negotiation to the early implementation steps between 2003 and 2019. The in-depth analysis of these documents made it possible to identify and highlight the formal rationale of the actors, while the informal one drove from the interpretation of the content of interviews and debates observed during separate rounds of negotiations on VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon.

4. Results: Understanding the agenda setting of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon

The adoption of the FLEGT Action Plan by the EU and the signing of a VPA with timber-producing countries, arise from a long process to bring the issue of illegal timber on the European market to light. It is also the result of an attempt to problematize the socio-economic and ecological implications of these informal tropical timber routes in producing and timber-exporting countries such as Cameroon (Cerutti and Tacconi, 2008; Eba Atyi and Assembe-Mvondo, 2013; Carodenuto and Cerutti, 2014). The objective here is to better understand the process through which the issue of legality in forest management became a political stake in Cameroon, and identify the various dynamics of mobilisation that arose from the issue of what can be considered as the quest for a 'good government'⁴ of timber production in Cameroon and the related trade and export to the European market.

4.1. The problematization of forest management and legality in Cameroon

Cameroon's willingness to adhere to global governance initiatives for forest law enforcement could date as far as the first international discussion initiatives on tropical timber illegal logging (Smouts, 2001; Humphreys, 2012). It is the result of a long process spanning in space and time. In space, because peoples' claims at the international and European level triggered the mainstreaming of illegal logging in the international agenda, and legal forest management and robust legislation on forests began to be seen as a solution to international illegal logging. In time, because the denunciation of this issue started since the 1970s in Europe and worldwide (Smouts, 2001).

Cameroon committed to sustainable forest management in the beginning of the 1990s. This was driven by two major facts. First, the 1992 Rio Conference, which formally set the international legal framework for the structuring of environmental policies architecture in African countries to follow. Second, the economic crisis that hit the country during the same period and led among other things to the imposition of the 1990s Structural Adjustment Plan - a set of austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions including the World Bank - on Cameroon. A handful of conditions were imposed on Cameroon as a result of the crisis. One of the main conditions was to introduce 'good governance' (enhancing transparency, accountability and participation) in forest sector (Ekoko, 2000; Tagou, 2011; Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015; Karsenty, 2017). At the national level, private media exacerbated these pressures by increasing public awareness on illegal logging and its shortcomings (Bigombe Logo and Dabire Atamana, 2003). As a result, and under the influence of the World Bank, France - a former colonial power- and members of Cameroon's elite (Ekoko, 2000), the government adopted a new forest policy focused on sustainable development in 1993 that was materialised in 1994 by the adoption of its first post Rio forest law and various enforcement regulations.

The situation at the end of the 1990s allowed to underscore that the reform of the forest sector initiated years earlier by international actors had not reached sustainable management targets. Many scholars pointed out huge gaps between sustainable management principles and rules contained in the Cameroonian legislation and the reality on the ground (Karsenty, 1999; Ekoko, 2000; Bigombe Logo and Dabire Atamana, 2003; Oyono, 2004).

The beginning of the 2000s was marked by a worldwide movement in favour of the World Bank-led *Forest Law Enforcement and Governance*,

FLEG. The movement gave rise to the ministerial commitment of Asian States in 2001 expressed by the *East Asian-Forest Law Enforcement and Governance, A-FLEG*; in Africa, in 2003 by the *African Forest Law Enforcement and Governance, AFLEG*; and the *Europe and Northern Asia Forest Law Enforcement and Governance, ENA-FLEG*. The organisation of a ministerial conference in Yaoundé, on October 2003 under the theme "*African Forest Law Enforcement and Governance, AFLEG*, will materialise Cameroon's formal commitment to adhere to this global initiative to enhance governance and legality in the tropical forest sector (Cashore and Stone, 2012). During this important forum, high-level decision makers, several African States leaders including Cameroon solemnly pledged to pursue the implementation of their forest legislations and the enhancement of their forest governance systems. These commitments enshrined in what was dubbed 'Yaoundé AFLEG Ministerial Statement' was the last major sign given by tropical timber producing countries of their 'voluntarily' commitment to the global 'good' forest governance process. A former Secretary General of the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife (MINFOF) said in this regard that it was in a bid to 'translate AFLEG into deeds that Cameroon would in 2005 show EU its interest for the FLEGT Action Plan'.⁵ As early as November 2007, negotiations for a voluntary agreement around the FLEGT began. These would lead to the signing of the VPA-FLEGT between Cameroon and EU in 2010.

Our work reveals that the period of delay between the negotiations and the signing⁶ of the agreement can be attributed in part to the public administrations' deliberate inertia. This inertia by the Cameroonian State bureaucracies and forest management officials was aimed at skilfully regain control of a unilaterally designed agreement by EU actors and whose provisions seemed less or not favourable to the Cameroonian party. According to a former senior official of Cameroon's forest administration who had been in office during much of the FLEGT negotiations period:

"Apart from the imbalance of power between Cameroon and EU, there was also an imbalance in negotiations. The EU came well prepared for these negotiations. It knew what it wanted, which was not the case for Cameroon! It even came with a framework agreement which Cameroon only had to sign. These negotiations were akin to a 'strait-jacket' EU wanted to clothe Cameroon in".⁷

The Cameroonian party mainly made up of forest administration civil servants less versed with diplomatic practices, was to negotiate with an EU delegation, with extensive experience in negotiation techniques and well prepared to convince Cameroon to sign the VPA-FLEGT. Cameroon, as the target country was also very dependent on its timber exports to EU Member States (France; Italy, Germany, Belgium, Spain, etc.) and on official assistance from these countries. In the face of such strategic, political and economic imbalance, Cameroon's forest administration deemed it necessary to take some time to draft and propose an alternative to the text proposed by the European party. The purpose of this skilful manoeuvre was to ensure that Cameroon's interests - and those of its representatives - were taken into account in a version of the VPA-FLEGT that was 'mutually beneficial' to the parties. This version was backed by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and private sector actors for whom the Cameroonian forest bureaucracy's 'clockwork' manoeuvres were intended, among other things, to allow time to provide an appropriate response to the many controversies they had with the first version of the VPA-FLEGT proposed by EU negotiators.

For example, the real stakes of the VPA-FLEGT for Cameroonian forest policy were not clearly defined; the Cameroonian party wanted

⁴ The notion of 'good government' used in this article refers to certain works of political philosophy, as depicted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco, who defines this notion as a governing mode in which governments graciously engage in improving public action to guarantee harmony and social peace (Rosanvallon, 2015).

⁵ Interview conducted in Yaoundé in October 2018.

⁶ Cameroon is the first country which took more than one year to negotiate the agreement, as compared to countries which took less time to negotiate and sign the VPA-FLEGT.

⁷ Interview conducted in Yaoundé in October 2018.

its European counterpart to agree on the relevance of issuing legality certificates⁸ before issuing FLEGT licences; all negotiations appeared to require a redefinition in order to reach a consensus on a better design of legality grids and to ensure a more convincing articulation between VPA-FLEGT and existing forest management tools such as the first “Computer-based Forest Information Management System (Computer-based FIMS)”⁹ and the tracking systems for private companies. The roles of the actors to be involved and the costs of the implementation of the agreement were equally unclear to the Cameroonian party; as well as it was important for her to make sure its partaking of the VPA-FLEGT process would not be synonymous to marginalisation or exclusion of its forest bureaucracy in the regulation of the forest sector in favour of the EU and local allies.

4.2. VPA-FLEGT as a public action in Cameroon

According to MINFOF senior officials, the implementation of VPA-FLEGT requires the putting in place of Europe-styled efficient wood tracking and legality assurance systems. Putting such systems in place requires a close collaboration between various key actors of the forest sector who sometimes have opposed interests and agendas. Before the launching of the FLEGT process, many actors had barely or never worked together.

4.2.1. Mapping, resources and strategies of actors

The public action around VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon reveals the existence of a mosaic of interacting actors, from the negotiations to the early implementation phase. These include public administrations, public and private actors from the logging sector, and international, national and local Civil Society Organizations, CSOs.

VPA-FLEGT negotiations were unprecedented in the recent history of forest governance in Cameroon, as many actors involved in the process acknowledged. The participative and inclusive approach to negotiations, as a prerequisite was an innovative approach in Cameroon. Thanks to this approach, the forest administration and EU, through the services of the European Commission, enjoined actors from other sectorial administrations (finance, labour, trade, environment, etc.), the private sector and trade unions, CSOs, elected officials and development partners to the discussion and adoption of principles and rules of forest governance.

Unlike representatives of the private sector and their trade unions, whose involvement was particularly modest or even passive during the VPA-FLEGT negotiations in Cameroon, the role of several other actors, grouped into coalitions or not, was a driving force. On behalf of CSOs, for example, national and local NGOs were grouped together in a platform called the European Community Forest Platform (ECFP), coordinated by a national NGO, the Centre for Environment and Development (CED). Parliamentarians were considered as members of the civil society.¹⁰ These actors received technical and financial support from some international agencies and NGOs. This inclusive negotiating format, open to non-State actors, was highly appreciated by national CSOs, for which such formal involvement at a high decision-making level was a recognition of their contribution to improving forest policies in Cameroon.

On the other hand, this openness and the various support provided to national CSOs were not much appreciated by the forest

administration, which considered this EU and partners' strategy as a desire to interfere and weaken the State by giving too much value to the role of non-State actors in the negotiation process.

In any case, this research observed that the mobilisation of the international civil society was a relay, a legitimisation or a guarantee for the development of the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon. It emerged as one of the major components and groups of actors of the European policy of good forest governance initiative in Cameroon. These CSOs - in a broad sense - could contribute in providing first-hand information on the issues of informal and illegal logging, or to promote transparency through *Independent Forest Monitoring (IFM)*-type systems. Other more aggressive CSOs (such as conservationist associations and NGOs) also played a lobbying and even a denunciation role of the (in)action of state bureaucracies in the face of illegal logging and marketing channels not only to Europe, but also increasingly to Asian and Chinese markets.

The European Commission's VPA-FLEGT negotiation teams were regularly supported by the EU Delegation in Cameroon, which was in charge of monitoring the process with Cameroonian partners. Other organisations such as the European Forest Institute (EFI) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) also support the EU in promoting and implementing the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon through the UE-FLEGT Facility and the UE-FAO-FLEGT-program, respectively managed by these two organisations and funded by the EU and some Member States, such as Great Britain, through its cooperation agency (DFID) or Germany, which development cooperation agency (GIZ), has been very active in forest governance in Cameroon. These programmes have often provided substantial financial support to MINFOF and several CSOs involved in the implementation process of the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon.

MINFOF is the formal supervisory body of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon. It carries out this function alongside other ad-hoc public bodies like the Joint Implementation Council, comprised of a representative of the EU and a representative of Cameroon; the Joint Monitoring Committee; which brings together Cameroon (MINFOF senior officials, civil society and private actors) and European (EU Delegation senior officials, multilateral and bilateral cooperation European organisations) actors and the National Monitoring Committee. The latter is comprised of national actors from the civil society and public and private sectors. As regards the LAS, MINFOF collaborates with other ministries (environment, finances, trade, labour, territorial administration, external relations and justice). MINFOF also engages civil society and the private sector through various VPA-FLEGT implementation projects and initiatives. MINFOF and EU Delegation to Cameroon publish a yearly progress report of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon.

National and local civil society was actively involved in the operationalization of the agreement through proposals and various VPA-FLEGT -related development projects. These projects were mostly financed by the EU -FAO-FLEGT program, the ENRTP¹¹ or by resources from bilateral cooperation agencies such as GIZ and DFID. Apart from their participation in VPA-related discussions, environmental and local development NGOs (FODER, CERAD, CED, SAILD, etc.) have the ultimate mandate to promote legality in the forest sector. The main target groups for their actions have been loggers, local and indigenous people, and public administrations of the forest and environmental sector.

National private sector actors are Cameroonian and foreign-owned companies, and national entrepreneurs of the timber sector. Due to their major participation in illegal timber production and marketing, this category of actors benefitted from several outreach initiatives on the principles of VPA-FLEGT. For example, projects to promote legal sawmilling and timber marketing procedures on a national scale were carried out between 2015 and 2018. Other similar initiatives focused on the assessment of the legality of logging licences or community forests

⁸ Document issued by the forest administration attesting to the legality of a forest company through the LAS.

⁹ In its french original version, *Système Informatisé de Gestion de L'Information Forestière 1 (SIGIF 1)*. The first Computer-based FIMS or SIGIF was a timber tracking system put in place by Canada in the 1990s and located within MINFOF.

¹⁰ The Cameroonian party deemed this classification controversial, as neither the parliamentarians nor the civil society agreed with it.

¹¹ Environment Natural Ressource Thematic Programme of the European Commission.

Table 1
Categories of key actors and related interests in the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon.

Actors	formal interest	informal interest	Means of influence
International Organisation (EU)	Promote an effective implementation of forest regulations and trade to tackle illegal logging.	- influence norms formulation and forest governance in Cameroon. - Play a key role in forest policy reforms dynamics.	- FLEGT Action Plan, EUTR, VPA; - Financial and technical support from Member States, EU-FAO-FLEGT programme, EU-FLEGT Facility, ENRTP, etc. -Economic and environmental diplomacy -Positioning technical advisors in ministries, providing financial and technical support to key actors from the forest-related administration and civil society organisations. -Diplomacy and lobbying with key forest and environment sectors actors.
Bilateral cooperation agencies (GIZ; DFID; etc.)	Support, advise and accompany social and political actors of the forest sector in VPA-FLEGT implementation.	-Harness EU's influence to guide forest reform policies. -Promote the vision, principles and standards (good governance, transparency, accountability, etc.) of donors in the host country.	- Recurring agenda setting of an endogenous forest policies reform - Production of delay and inertia in the internationalisation and implementation of VPA-FLEGT.
State actor (MINFOF)	Adherence and official support to international efforts to combat illegal logging.	-Dilute the ambitions of VPA-FLEGT and subtly weaken its roots to maintain full control of the forest sector. -Punctual benefits from the VPA-FLEGT dividends.	- Lobbying and coalitions with international actor groups (big conservation NGOs, international organisations, bilateral cooperation agencies,, etc.). -Advocacy, blame and shame campaign. -Publishing of counter-expertise reports on the state of forest governance.
National and international civil society organisations (FERN; WWF; CERAD; FODER; CED; etc.)	-Support FLEGT implementation at the national level. -Promote transparency and law enforcement in the forest sector through independent monitoring systems. -Ensure the taking into account of environmental concerns and the protection of people's rights in the formulation and implementation of the VPA-FLEGT.	-Take advantage of VPA-FLEGT negotiations to impose private interests and increase CSOs' influence in forest governance -Extend the preparatory phase of the VPA-FLEGT for a better rent capture that has become essential for the financing of some national CSOs.	-Consensus meetings; -Selective sharing and publication of information with non-platform actors, etc.
multi-actor and multi-level platform (Joint legality assurance council/ committee, etc.)	-Ensure collaboration between national and international actors and among national or local actors. -Ensure a better formalisation, technical and administrative institutionalisation of the VPA-FLEGT.	- Ensure peaceful implementation of VPA-FLEGT and promote a convergence of interests of key actors.	
Private sector/interest groups (logging companies and operators)	-Operationalization of rules and principles of VPA-FLEGT. -Development of a legal market (domestic and exports) for Cameroon-produced timber.	-Simplify the rules of promotion and reduce legality costs -advocate for a limited respect of rules to influence the VPA-FLEGT implementation process.	-Prospecting and developing new little or no constraining markets (China, etc.) to the operationalization of the VPA-FLEGT. - Lobbying and advocacy with MINFOF and European negotiators to push for the consideration of their business interests.
Major epistemic communities (Academic and research institutions)	-Insight and expertise to the production of the necessary knowledge to identify disruptions, changes and continuities of the VPA-FLEGT process.	-Defend their viewpoints and positions before key actors of the VPA-FLEGT process. -Make use of VPA-FLEGT rents to finance research projects or consulting opportunities.	-Scientific knowledge productions on VPA-FLEGT. -Defend their viewpoints and public participation in VPA-FLEGT-related discussions.

management by local entrepreneurs.

Lastly, our research identified a category of actors with often limited presence in public policies as well as in negotiations arenas, but with significant influence, namely academic and research institutions. This category of epistemic communities is often represented in the FLEGT process by teachers/researchers, who often work as consultants while being faculty members in Cameroonian or Western universities and research institutes. Since the negotiation phase, their insight and expertise have helped to guide actions and decision-making on whether or not VPA-FLEGT should be put on Cameroon's policy agenda [Table 1](#).

4.2.2. FLEGT at a crossroads between coproduction of delay, mistrust and make-believe

According to a joint assessment of the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon conducted in mid-2019, the EU and Cameroonian partners were still looking for a 'common vision' and the most appropriate 'roadmap' needed for an effective implementation of this policy instrument. In other words, the erratic and low level of FLEGT implementation in Cameroon since 2010 after the process was launched later confirms the hypothesis that the dynamics of forest policy reform driven by the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon is bogged down in an indefinite preparation cycle (workshops, consultations, projects, surveys, and various consulting missions). Although the need to tackle illegal logging might be grounded in good intentions, the effective implementation of

policies and legality instruments is constantly procrastinated. This stagnation in the preparation phase results in a sort of collective inertia. The development of Computer-based FIMS II, namely SIGIF II is a typical example. The preparation cycles of the putting in place of an application to manage timber tracking and forest-related information had been ongoing since 2012, but until 2018, the validation deadline of the software application had always been postponed. A first application, designed in Europe and financed by the European Commission was rejected by MINFOF on the grounds that it was "not adapted to the realities" of forest management in Cameroon. The second application developed in Cameroon, led by MINFOF and financed by the German cooperation through the KfW bank and supposed to be made available in October 2018, was not validated and made available on the said date due to doubts by European Commission partners on the "reliability" of Cameroonian's version of SIGIF II. Apart from the delay in designing SIGIF II, the designing process was essentially marked, until end of 2018 by a series of consulting contracts - often followed by various riders, meetings, workshops, and field missions carried out by several FLEGT entrepreneurs. In this game of no-confidence between MINFOF and the EU actors, the Cameroonian party fears an erosion of its sovereignty in the forest sector. For the European counterpart, good governance of forests, as a "global public good" is at utmost stake and could justify some extraterritorial policy measures to ensure the legality of the timber destined for the European market. In the case of SIGIF II,

this power relation is summarised by a MINFOF senior official involved in the implementation of Cameroon's VPA-FLEGT as follows:

“The trouble with the EU is that they want us to give them SIGIF codes so they can manage it.”¹²

According to EU Delegation officials, Cameroon has often failed to abide by its commitments under VPA-FLEGT and tried to distort its fundamentals. Many observers suggest one of the major reasons for EU mistrust toward MINFOF lies in corruption and cronyism practices, well grounded in Cameroon's forest administration and that EU attempts to combat. This example of instrumentation of a technical aspect of SIGIF II reveals that despite power imbalance between the two parties, Cameroon could have subtly regained control over the VPA-FLEGT process.

Several social sciences studies have portrayed the different logics underlying these forms of coproduction of delay and inertia in public action. In the literature of African studies for example, the work of Chabal and Daloz, 1999 (Chabal and Daloz (1999) on the “instrumentation of disorder” as a political instrument allowed to observe that stagnation in preparation gives rise to different types of interest, both for VPA-FLEGT reform promoters and for target countries actors.

As regards the first set of actors, stagnation of preparation could facilitate the enjoinder of new ‘target’ countries by delaying a potential acknowledgement of failure of the implementation of the agreement in countries where the EU FLEGT reform process is already ongoing. Besides, a continuous delay of preparation could be an implicit means by some donors and/or their intermediaries to increase the ‘consumption’ rates of funding allocated for a given forest policy reform agenda. With substantial honorary allowances for consultations or the maintenance of a roaming economy, reform agencies and their service providers are at the forefront of individual profit and dividends (mission expenses, tourism, networking for professional and private agenda, etc.). A vivid illustration of this point can be found in the calls for consulting to reform SIGIF II software application, where consultants seem particularly satisfied with the various opportunities for expertise and counter-expertise generated by the tensions between MINFOF and the EU over SIGIF affair.

Concerning the second set of actors, recent studies (Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015) suggest, through the case study of Cameroon, that a persistent delay and more generally inertia are often used by State bureaucracies in ‘fragile-sovereignty’ countries through a set of *cunning government* tactics to avoid, transform or sabotage policy reforms perceived as imposed or imported. This cunning strategy also enables this category of actors to “play the game” of change in governance forest governance while skilfully avoiding “blame” in case the imported policy reforms fail at national level. The high number of obstacles to the implementation of the VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon is a perfect illustration of this strategy. The limited fulfilment of commitments taken since 2010 by Cameroon forest administration evidences its lack of interest in a rapid completion of this policy reform process. It can therefore be assumed that, the stagnation in the preparation phase and the inertia that follows provide actors with individual one-time gains that would disappear, had FLEGT-type policy reforms be diligently implemented.

In the same vein and based on several cases in the field of health governance in West Africa, Oliver de Sardan (1999) highlights the issue of “Daily Subsistence Allowances” (DSAs) or *per diem*, and other ‘wage supplements’ or equivalent in development projects in Africa, as one of the main short-term motivations of civil servants to engage in international policy reforms agenda. The preservation of *per diem* and varied wage supplements economy is one of the reasons why the EU FLEGT process in Cameroon is embedded in an indefinite preparation cycle. In the same way, the treasury of several civil society organisations in Cameroon significantly depends on funds generated in the preparatory phases of global forest governance reforms agenda like the

VPA-FLEGT. A substantial part of this funding is captured by these organisations through consulting fees, quest for inclusive and participatory processes or their involvement in a reform process, which legitimacy is often assessed with regard to the degree of participation of CSOs. It is for instance the case with the workshops on VPA-FLEGT processes, which are often organised out of the capital city –Yaoundé– where the majority of forest related organisations in Cameroon are headquartered. One of the reasons why the workshops on the VPA-FLEGT process are carried out of Yaoundé is the need to justify the various incentives provided to selected participants.

On this issue of ‘co-production of delay’ and its instrumentation in forest policy reform dynamics in Africa, similar observations were empirically demonstrated in the case of other global forest governance reforms agenda such as REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation of Forests) process in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ehrenstein, 2013) and in Cameroon (Viard-Cretat, 2016). In the same vein, Blundo (2015)’s works bring interesting insights on the issue of coproduction of delay in the domain of management policies of budgetary assistance in Cameroon and Niger.

Aside, these informal interests of the actors as a delaying factor to VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon; other technical and socio-political factors can explain the poor implementation of the instrument. At the technical level, for example, the LAS and the Wood Tracking System, which if implemented would guarantee the enhancement of governance and logging and marketing processes were still at an experimental stage in the forest administration¹³ nearly 10 years after the process was launched. At the socio-political level, the 1994 forest law reform project, landmark of the actual update of the legal framework in the forest sector, was also bogged down in long-lasting administrative procedures for at least a decade. A situation that led many actors to question the genuine will of the forestry bureaucracy to review the law within a reasonable time.

Funding is also listed among the reasons of the stagnation of this reform agenda. According to Annex X of the EU-Cameroon VPA-FLEGT Agreement, the implementation of the agreement was to be largely financed by the State's own funds in the form of matching funds. Contributions from international partners including EU were to supplement these sovereign funds which purpose was to demonstrate the degree of ownership of VPA-FLEGT by the State. Practically speaking, most of the funding available for VPA-FLEGT activities in Cameroon comes from the EU through EU-FAO-FLEGT program at FAO, ENTRP and Member states.

At the administrative level, the exclusive handing of VPA-FLEGT implementation to MINFOF arose disinterest from other administrations whose participation is essential to the success of this initiative in Cameroon. The putting in place and efficient functioning of LAS require an efficient coordination of responsibilities of all administrations involved to ensure agenda, priorities and interest's coherence. This cannot be achieved where relevant administrations do not work in close collaboration. The situation on the ground revealed that forest administration officials had made VPA-FLEGT their ‘businesses’, by excluding other State bureaucracies (ministry of justice, environment, trade, finances, labour, external relations, and territorial administration) from decisions related to the management and implementation of the instrument. According to some bureaucrats of these ‘excluded’ administrations, MINFOF officials’ behaviour has strengthened their apathy and distrust toward VPA-FLEGT. Some of them, as a ministry of environment senior official underscored, justified this apathy or mistrust by the absence of any provision in VPA-FLEGT clearly stating the obligations, responsibilities, deadline for implementation for every administration which participation could be essential to the process.

¹³ Large forest companies have set up tracking systems and use private legality certification systems to meet due diligence requirements necessary to export to Europe (or other international markets).

¹² Interview conducted in Yaoundé, July 2018

Other roadblocks need to be pointed out. They include on the one hand the high level of corruption and permanent resistance to any change in practices in interactions between forest administration, forest operators and users at different levels. A community forest manager in eastern Cameroon, who believes VPA-FLEGT could improve access to information and strengthen law enforcement, regrets that despite Cameroon's commitment to the VPA-FLEGT, the practices of MINFOF's monitoring units (forest control brigades) have not changed:

"If at a checkpoint, the agent asks you to pay something for your wooden truck to cross and you present your papers, he will tell you that your papers will make you cross! And your wood stays there. Meanwhile the client is waiting for you at the Douala Port. You have no other choice than to pay, if not you lose your client."¹⁴

4.2.3. What does the FLEGT process changes for forest governance?

Despite delay in the implementation, observers posit that the putting on agenda of VPA-FLEGT has undoubtedly changed the forest governance momentum in Cameroon. This could be underpinned by several major facts. On the one hand, VPA-FLEGT made participative approach in the management of forest affairs a reality and information related to the production of public action in the forest sector is no longer solely the discretionary power of state bureaucracies.¹⁵ On the other hand, corruption practices in the administration and in forest monitoring and control units are increasingly exposed to CSOs' *blame and shame* campaigns. However, this impact of the VPA-FLEGT on the enhancement of Cameroon's forest governance remains relatively marginal compared to the degree of stagnation in the form of co-production of delay and the consolidation of administrative inertia in the forest policy domain in Cameroon.

5. Should 'our forests' be governed through foreign policy instruments?

The exogenous nature of the VPA-FLEGT, as it was designed and introduced in Cameroon by European actors, proved problematic in a context of sovereignist 'psychosis' where any reform initiative designed and proposed by external actors arouses mistrust or even rejection within State bureaucracies. In view of the recent evolution of policy reforms in Cameroon, this tendency to claim more sovereignty is not a mere fiction. It is based in particular on the situation of the 1990s economic reform policies, hallmark of the State's withdrawal or re-deployment attempts (Hibou, 1998). Such attempts, often coupled with an agenda of political regimes democratisation and consideration for ecological stakes in Africa were widely perceived by African countries as illegitimate external injunctions of "good governance". In forest management more especially, the various attempts to depart from patrimonial management practices of the "Forest State" (Karsenty, 1999, 2017; Bigombe Logo, 2004) in Central Africa and in Cameroon in particular, were often grounded in a set of imposed (or perceived as imposed) reforms on local governments by international actors such as the World Bank. A handful of studies emphasise these realities in Cameroon with examples drawn from forest concessions management, legal reforms, or biodiversity conservation (Ekoko, 2000; Dkamela et al., 2014; Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015; Karsenty, 2017).

Following the above brief historical narration of forest policy reforms in Cameroon, the case of the VPA-FLEGT process can raise two questions. First, how can this instrument sustainably integrate Cameroon's forest policy dynamics in view of forestland politics in this country? Second, can VPA-FLEGT effectively address illegality in

Cameroon's forest sector as it has been put forward by its promoters?

5.1. Importation and politicization of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon

As a result of numerous participatory observation and discussions we had with key actors of the forest sector in Cameroon, some local actors assert that the signing of VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon might not really emanate from a voluntary endeavour of the Cameroonian government. Others think VPA-FLEGT is nothing but a "neo-colonisation mask" of Cameroon's forests by European powers.

Cameroon's voluntary commitment to the FLEGT process raises controversy not only because of the imbalance of power between Cameroon and EU, but also due to the misbelief¹⁶ widely shared within the Cameroonian party to the negotiations that the non-possession of FLEGT licences would close off access to the European timber market to Cameroonian exports. We can assume to a lesser extent that the official non-commitment of Cameroon to the FLEGT initiative would have chilled its relationship with its strong European partner and drastically reduced its timber exports to Europe, once the main destination for its timber exports, at least till the beginning of the 2000s. Given the aforementioned stakes, the Cameroonian government had clearly called on the attention of private actors and civil society organisations that the only possible solution was to reach a consensus that was favourable to the signing of VPA-FLEGT, as a key factor in these pre-negotiation phase points out: "*We had only one choice: reach a consensus so as to enable the Government to sign this agreement.*"¹⁷

At the end of this pre-negotiation phase, a consensus was reached to the detriment of some important concerns of the less influential actors in the negotiation process. For example, the determination and involvement of all the public administrations constituting the LAS should have been made at this stage. This forced decision was interpreted by some actors as the enforcement of an order, namely the adoption of EU FLEGT with as few Cameroon officials as possible.

According to some local and international actors, the FLEGT Action Plan aimed at restoring EU countries as a central actor of tropical forest management in the aftermath of colonisation. European countries were indeed the leaders of forest management in tropical Africa and Cameroon in particular in the beginning of the 20th century. Through the VPA-FLEGT process, European powers would thus regain, through incentives, control of previously coercive tropical forest sectors. In other words, they would give themselves the power to directly determine from the EU headquarters the 'good' rules and procedures to which all other players should henceforth abide, in return they are given access to the precious European timber market as also pointed out by Montouroy (2014). This was the image MINFOF officials in charge of the monitoring of SIGIF II and some private sector actors had of the EU. They blame the European party (at multilateral or bilateral level) for imposing their preferences, pace and agenda on them, thus altering the sovereignty of the Cameroonian State, which the EU and its allies regularly try to marginalise or even ignore.

Whatever the foundations and level of veracity of these allegations, they portray some of the imaginations of the majority of local forest governance actors in Cameroon, who see VPA-FLEGT as the symbol of a new mode of Western domination in the governance of forestland resources.

5.2. Is VPA-FLEGT an innovative tool for a 'good governance' of forests?

VPA-FLEGT are touted by their promoters as the very first

¹⁴ Over the phone interview, August 2018.

¹⁵ Non-state actors are the first to praise these unprecedented milestones in Cameroon's forest sector. All forest sector stakeholders are now involved in all stages of forest management with MINFOF ensuring a greater level of information sharing.

¹⁶ During the pre-negotiation and negotiation phases, concerns about due diligence and EUTR had not been sufficiently raised by the European party to enable Cameroon's party to understand that there would be an opportunity to export timber to the EU without a FLEGT licence.

¹⁷ Interview with a senior private forest manager in Yaoundé, April 2016

international trade legally binding initiative, capable of improving tropical forest governance. In Cameroon, the main actors of the forest sector agree on the innovative nature of this European policy of legality enhancement of forest management. According to some of them, the changes it induces and its potential contribution to the enhancement of forest governance in Cameroon are unprecedented. Despite promises made by VPA-FLEGT to establish good governance by increasing law enforcement in forest management in Cameroon, many local actors believe its lack of legitimacy and lack of a local political entrenchment are its major weaknesses. Some believe the 'imported' origin of the EU FLEGT substantially undermines its chances of ownership and success in Cameroon's forest governance arenas. Others posit that the imbalance between the considerable resources allocated to the formulation of this agreement at the preparation stage and the procrastination surrounding its implementation, contributes to its stagnation and substantially compromises the attainment of its objectives.

One of the main reasons that may lead VPA-FLEGT towards a programmed failure is the poor knowledge and overshadowing of the socio-anthropological context of co-operation policies between Cameroon and its international partners. This analysis is supported by an assessment of the VPA-FLEGT process in the Congo Basin (Bigombe Logo, 2015). This study revealed that the EU had not sufficiently considered the political temperature and weighed the informal realities that structure forest governance in the target countries of the VPA-FLEGT process in Central Africa. EU political actors and experts did not, for instance deem it necessary to assess the reality of power relations within and between State bureaucracies, where participation or exclusion could strongly influence effective implementation or otherwise of VPAs-FLEGT in the Congo Basin countries. Such a study would have allowed to understand that mainstreaming legality in the Cameroonian forest sector requires a profound change of mindset and a genuine will from the actors rather than a mere existence or enactment of laws. It would have been appropriate to institute a "stratification of legality" backed by incentives to stimulate the attainment of the highest legality level.

In the same vein, no prior empirical study was carried out by the European party to assess the willingness of local stakeholders to make this instrument a success. One could wonder or realise, in view of the 1994 WB-led forest policy reform, if the forest administration or other actors from the sector were ready to enact a purely exogenous policy instrument such as VPA-FLEGT. Or what was Cameroon real motivation to abide by international forest agreements? No attention was equally paid to the evaluation of existing technical control mechanisms for logging activities in the target countries, which could to some extent have provided a consensual basis for the establishment of more appropriate wood tracking and legality assurance systems.

5.3. Implementing a new policy using archaic laws

Simply put, VPA-FLEGT's objective can be summed up in one sentence: building a new tropical forest sustainability policy by strengthening existing legal frameworks. In other words, sustainable logging and reduction of illegal logging would be guaranteed by strict and systematic enforcement of all existing national forest regulations. This research shows that a strict application of the laws primarily depends on the will, motivation and capacity of local actors and the determination of state bureaucracies in the tropics to compel recalcitrant logging entrepreneurs to strictly respect the laws and regulations that regulate the forest sector.

This reality raises several questions that could inspire further research on the implementation of the European forest policy reforms in the tropics. One of the questions that could guide new empirical research is how a reform policy perceived as imposed and illegitimate, such as VPA-FLEGT, could reverse the trend and ensure more legality in a social and anthropological context where informal practices and law avoidance seem to be the norm. Beyond postures and denunciation of

an 'imported' instrument, our work shows that local actors have a real potential to transform or even instrument the VPA-FLEGT process.

5.4. Way forward: FLEGT-XIT or FLEGT+?

The stagnation of the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon leads to a huge loss of time and money, what pushes some actors to agree to the fact that in any case, the inertia maintained by the key actors of the process was not the solution. It is therefore necessary to "move forward!"¹⁸ Local actors proposed two scenarios to Cameroon: (i) FLEGT-XIT: halt and exit from the VPA-FLEGT process, as provided for in section 27 of EU-Cameroon VPA-FLEGT; (ii) FLEGT+: proceed with the implementation of VPA-FLEGT, but with a more determined resolution to lift the various roadblocks that hinder the smooth running of this process. Whatever scenario is adopted, all the parties involved in VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon seem to have acknowledged the fact that strengthening effective legality and improving governance in logging activities are crucial and a prerequisite to the sustainability or a good government of forests in Cameroon.

6. Conclusion

This study on the agenda-setting of a global forest governance reform, VPA-FLEGT, in Cameroon allowed to demonstrate that the exogenous design of that European policy instrument and the imbalances between EU and Cameroon at the negotiation phase are the main points of its contestation. Interactions among actors from different levels of power and sectors, as well as power imbalance between key actors of the process lead to diverse forms of representations. It creates a negotiation setting wherein stakeholders' hidden or private agenda and genuine interests are overshadowed by a permanent game of 'make-believe'. However, despite its drawbacks, VPA-FLEGT emergence in Cameroon made key actors of the forest sector aware that there is a pressing need for domestic actors and institutions to abide by their own laws.

The findings of this study do not allow for the entire validation of the hypothesis according to which VPA-FLEGT in Cameroon would be the hallmark of a sort of *imported government* by analogy with Badie's 'imported State' (Badie, 1992). Though VPA-FLEGT formulation and introduction into Cameroon essentially arise from an EU will, local actors proved their ability to transform, or even instrument it, what limits the stagnation of the VPA-FLEGT process in Cameroon to a simple "graft rejection" in the sense of resistance to an imposed policy reform. As part of concluding remarks on the "imported State" notion, three points need to be highlighted. First, it would be misleading to limit the dynamics of post-colonial African State construction to the sole colonial trap of path-dependency, as it also follows the rationale of its own socio-cultural history and its relationship to the world (Mbembe, 1992; Bayart, 1996a, b; Bayart and Ellis, 2000). Second, since the 2000s, many African States seem to have skilfully "regained control" (Eboko, 2015b) of their public and domestic affairs. Their centrality, including in internationally prescribed public action dynamics seems to be restored. Third and last, resort to various forms of tricks to avoid blame (Weaver, 1986) is often the game played by State bureaucracies when their power balance is more or less skewed. In Cameroon, various sorts of sham have been used by political actors vis-à-vis international financial institutions and pro-conservation organisations whose involvement in the dynamics of "good governance" of tropical forests. In the majority of cases, these good governance processes are perceived as political meddling. In such a context, one of the main challenges for international and external design forest governance policy reforms like the EU FLEGT is to instigate and maintaining an in-depth debate and

¹⁸ Local NGOs have coined the term "FLEGT-XIT" to refer to a possible withdrawal of Cameroon from the FLEGT process.

dialogue over the policy reform processes. The aim of such a frank and open debate would be to explore the effects of a withdrawal (i.e., FLEGT-XIT), status quo or one step forward (i. e., FLEGT+) policy options for all the key stakeholders involved in a specific forest policy reform process. In the case of postcolonial societies like Cameroon and many other timber-exporting countries in the tropics, a promising avenue for new research would consist in scrutinising who are or would be the losers and winners for each of the above options, and what would be the related consequences for the governance of tropical forests in an era of sustainable development goals.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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